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C O N F I D E N T I A L HAVANA 000685

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SUBJECT: CUBA: DISSIDENT DAGOBERTO VALDES REAPPEARS

REF: HAVANA 677

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Robert Blau; Reasons 1.4 (b/d)

¶1. (C) Dissident Church lay leader Dagoberto Valdes appeared out of the blue in Havana July 18, and met with Charge at a Polish Embassy reception. Valdes said he and the staff that worked with him in the Pinar del Rio "Center for Civic and Religious Training" are all no longer involved in any capacity with that activity, with "Vital" Magazine, or with Bishop Serpa based in Pinar del Rio. Serpa, he said, was at the extreme pro-regime end of the spectrum; his having replaced the more free-thinking Bishop Siro in April was "purely a political maneuver by Cardinal Jaime Ortega," who Valdes also asserts is in bed with the Cuban regime. Valdes added that the Vatican defers its Cuba policy to Ortega, which he said was not always the case during John Paul II's papacy.

¶2. (C) Valdes himself looked healthy and said he was in good spirits. Although cut off from his Church-based dissident activities, as well as internet access, he stays busy with private charitable works. He reported being the object of regime espionage and harassment, which was nothing new, but harder to deal with now that he has lost Bishop Siro's cover. He missed editing "Vital" magazine, and observed that the new editorial management would neuter its message.

¶3. (C) Comment: We saw the first post-Dagoberto "Vital" magazine a few weeks ago and it clearly lacks the sparkle and daring it had previously. As we reported last week in reference to the Latin American Bishops Conference meeting in Havana, the Church in Cuba is trapped into a modus vivendi with the regime that limits the space available for free thinking. As such, religious faith and the religious teachings of the Church provide inspiration for dissidents and change agents, but the Church itself is not a change agent.
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